Police officer shoots benefit claimant in German unemployment office

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On Thursday May 19, a female police officer shot dead a 39-year-old woman in an unemployment benefit centre in the Gallus district of Frankfurt-am-Main. The victim was from Nigeria, but had a German passport and lived in Frankfurt.

She had come into the Jobcentre, a branch of the unemployment services that serves refugees and homeless people, that morning because she urgently needed financial assistance. She had submitted her official claim nine days earlier. However, upon arriving at the office, she was told she could not receive her benefits in cash because the money could only be paid into a bank account.

According to the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, the amount in question was "no more than fifty euros" and the woman was clearly in a desperate situation. Jobcentre employees say that the woman became "loud", and refused to leave the building until she got her money in cash. After the security personnel tried to remove her, the police were called.

When a police patrol arrived consisting of a 30-year-old policeman and a 28-year-old policewoman, they demanded to see the Nigerian woman's identity card. According to Chief Magistrate Thomas Bechtel, the woman responded by reaching into her bag to take out a knife. She then stabbed the policeman in the belly. At that moment, the policewoman drew her pistol and shot her at close range. The bullet went through the woman's stomach and pelvic artery. She died as she was being taken to hospital. The policeman underwent emergency surgery that evening.

The very next day—that is, even before the incident had been officially investigated—the press was reporting that the shooting occurred as part of "emergency measures" taken to address the situation. "Everything speaks to the fact that the policewoman was responding to an emergency threat when she killed the Jobcentre claimant", wrote the *Frankfurter Rundschau* in the underline of its report on May 20. The trades unions wasted no words on the woman who was killed, and immediately bewailed the "violence against police".

Despite the effort of the media and the police union to absolve the state of any responsibility for the woman's death, the incident raises unsettling questions. If the Jobcentre is supposed to be a support centre for refugees and the homeless, then why should it not be possible for a woman in such obviously dire financial straits to be paid her benefits in cash? Isn't it only reasonable to assume that exactly the kind of people the centre is designed to support—refugees, homeless people, the unemployed—will include many who do not a bank account and are unable to get one?

How can it be that a policewoman, whose special task it is to placate and disarm women who have lost control and become aggressive, chooses instead to react by shooting her dead? Did she really have no other choices available? What light does this throw upon the public service instructions and training of patrolling police officers?

The two trade unions, Komba and Polizeigewerkschaft (which have up till now been the only ones to issue statements about the incident) have vaguely criticised the current Hartz-IV unemployment benefit legislation, implying that the acute problems in jobcentres could be ameliorated if "the legislators would (……) at last make sensible regulations".

"If people can't understand public service administration procedures, and it is a matter of survival for them, then it is not unpredictable that they overreact out of anger and despair," said head of the police trade union, Rainer Wendt.

Wendt, however, remained silent about the fact the DGB (German Trades Union Federaton) itself played a crucial role in formulating the current Hartz-IV legislation. These laws have led to a drastic increase in poverty levels amongst working people, due to the promotion of low-wage jobs and short-term contracts, affecting both German and immigrant workers.

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